

The Gentiles in Acts

THE four questions herewith, are the basis of the following reply.

Ephesians 3:6,7 details particulars regarding the secret economy, viz., the equality of Jew and gentile. Now, Galatians also expresses this equality, and this latter is prior to Acts twenty-eight. Why, therefore, emphasize Ephesians as a new departure inaugurated subsequent to Acts twenty-eight?

In 1 Corinthians 12:12,13, we have Jew and gentile baptized into one body. How, then, can it be truly affirmed that the statement of Ephesians 3:6,7 are particulars of a new economy not revealed before Acts twenty-eight?

The Roman epistle was written about Acts twenty, and therein it is said (ch.11), "blindness is happened to Israel." Why not, in view of this, make the line of demarcation at this point instead of at Acts twenty-eight?

Those to whom Paul preached from Acts thirteen to twenty-eight, that is, who believed his preaching, were introduced into the kingdom of God. If a new dispensation commenced afterwards, and those reached by Paul's previous ministry (Acts thirteen to twenty-eight) were transferred to the new order of things, then we take from them what had been theirs, in accord with the message by Paul before Acts twenty-eight. Further, to have inducted them into the kingdom of God, and to have know of an impending change, which would remove the blessings so promised, is to base the ministry on false statements.

"Blindness in part is happened to Israel" (Rom.11:25). What are we to understand by this? Is it equal in meaning to the announcement of the apostle on his arrival at Rome recorded at the close of Acts?

The Roman epistle was written from Corinth about Acts twenty. Was the apostle's statement then in this epistle a signal that callousness had come over Israel in as full and complete a measure as in Acts twenty-eight? Before answering the query, let us consider certain matters which will tend to make connections clear.

To Israel, in Jerusalem, Peter announced "repentance and baptism with a view to pardon," and this was in relation to the crime of which Israel was guilty—the murder of Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God (Acts 2). This testimony is repeated under various circumstances, culminating in the stoning of Stephen, detailed in Acts the seventh chapter.

Out of the latter arises two points: the scattering of the disciples (except the twelve), and the introduction of Saul. Those who were dispersed at this point witnessed to none but Jews (Acts 11:19). Meanwhile, the apostles' ministry is extended to Judea and Samaria, and the limits of the land (Acts 8, and 9:33-43). During this period we have that most unique call of Saul described. The next two chapters indicate that the success of the ministry in the land is reaching its limit. Opposition from those in authority is evidenced, even to the killing of James. Apparently those in the land will not repent at the instance of the ministry of the apostles. What then will be the action of the twelve? For the time being they stay in Jerusalem, and are still there in Acts fifteen, but we have no record in the Acts of any extension or intensification of their ministry to either Israel or the nations.

On the other hand, the holy spirit gives the notable instructions to those at Antioch recorded in Acts thirteen: "Separate Me Barnabas and Saul." It would thus appear that the holy spirit is now turning from Israel, for Jerusalem was the center of operations at the commencement of the Acts.

Barnabas and Saul are dispatched upon a mission outside the land, detailed in chapters thirteen and fourteen. Two features are obvious from this work; the opposition of the Jew (13:45), and the receptivity of the nations to whom a "door of faith" is opened (14:27).

Subsequent to this journey, Paul and Barnabas are at Jerusalem rehearsing their position and experiences to the twelve. The great subject of the relationship of the nations to the law and circumcision is discussed and Paul and Barnabas are equipped with decrees from the twelve to the nations.

Paul continues his itinerary, outlined in chapters sixteen and seventeen; again we have the features of Jewish opposition to, and the ready reception by the nations, of the evangel. Paul reaches Corinth in chapter eighteen. Here the conduct of the Jews is such we are informed that the apostle "shook his raiment" and repeated the characteristic warning phrase, "your blood be upon your own heads." He separated himself from them and conducted his ministry apart from the synagogue. Now, Paul had turned to the nations before, but had not left the synagogue in doing so. Significant it is that Paul stays here eighteen months (18:11). The next place the apostle stays for any lengthy period is Ephesus (see chapter 19), where the same procedure arises, Paul separating into "the school of one Tyrannus."

The statement in 19:21, "after these things were ended," is the prelude to what may be termed Paul's *written* ministry. The apostle is in Ephesus at the time of these words, and doubtless wrote the two Corinthian epistles from there; later he goes to Macedonia and Greece (see Acts 20:1,2) and at this juncture he writes Romans and Galatians.

It is evident that the apostasy and opposition of the Jew has increased degree by degree, and at this point the written teaching prepares for Acts twenty-eight. It is only necessary for the opportunity to arise for fresh outburst of opposition and these are given us in the succeeding chapters (21 to 26).

Turning to the particular declaration of Romans 11:25, Paul *writes* "Israel has become calloused in part." Let it be observed that he makes this *written* statement to the saints at Rome; callousness has "happened" to Israel but the *public* announcement to the Jews themselves is deferred until the apostle reaches Rome. It is not without importance that the quotation from Isaiah six in Acts twenty-eight is the only *public* utterance of this scripture, though it is referred to seven different times. In the gospels it is quoted privately to His disciples when the Lord Jesus witnessed that they were blind and deaf. So far back as Ezekiel 12:2 Jehovah speaks to the prophet saying that Israel has the organs of sight and hearing, but they are blind and deaf. So also does the prophet Jeremiah (5:21) refer to this blindness and deafness. Notwithstanding all this, Israel insisted that they did see and hear (John 9:39-41).

The intention of the words "in part" may be understood in two ways, both of which I consider to be true. First, the apostle has shown in Romans eleven that there always had been a remnant of faithful ones in Israel, and so also at that time there was a "remnant according to the election of grace" (11:5), thus blindness had happened to all but this portion. None were added to this remnant after Acts twenty-eight. Second, it is also affirmed in this chapter that God has not Cast away His people: they are "beloved for the fathers' sake" (11:28); God's graces are unregretted. Thus the blindness is not absolute, it is only relative, it is limited until "the complement of the nations comes in" (11:25). The nations were being evangelized by Paul with a view to provoking Israel to jealousy (11:11). Will Israel see the lesson which is being enacted before them? Righteousness is being obtained by the nations apart from law. "I will provoke you to jealousy by them that are no people" (10:19). Will Israel learn and submit themselves to God's righteousness even as the nations, who are not a people? But Israel persists in her defection. They have killed the Lord Jesus and their prophets and forbid the apostles to speak to the nations (see 1 Thess.2:15,16). The final and *public* pronouncement upon Israel does not, however, go forth until the apostle reaches Rome.

What is spoken of in the eleventh of Romans by Paul, viz., Israel's defection on the one hand, and their salvation on the other (see verses 26 and 27), this, in another form, comes before those to whom Peter had ministered (see 1 Peter 1:10,11). The interval between the suffering and glory of Christ gave rise to perplexity. Peter, however, demonstrates that Israel's rulers are the builders who have set at nought "the Stone" (see 1 Peter 2:7 and cf Acts 4:5 and 11) but he assures them they are an elect race, a royal priesthood, etc. (1 Peter 2:9). The scriptures which the apostle Paul used to illustrate God's dealings with the nations (Rom.9:25,26)

Peter interprets of Israel (1 Peter 2:10). Peter is addressing in these epistles the dispersion of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. A reference to Acts 2:9,10, makes it evident that those spoken to there came from the districts now written to by the apostle. A second epistle is addressed to them, emphasizing the truth of the Lord's coming and kingdom, and counseling them to see salvation in the delay between the suffering and glory which will be revealed.

The sum of all this is, the nations have not replaced Israel, despite her defection. At the inception of Israel's history, before their entry into the land, we find their great leader Moses, who figures God's greater prophet, Jesus Christ, bursting forth into song. Moses had given ten addresses, during approximately a month, picturing God's love and Israel's duty and unique position. In Deuteronomy thirty-two we get Moses' song, which is a concise summary of Israel's history. It shows their waywardness, but insists that God would bring them back. The climax is reached when Israel is reinstated in the land and the call goes forth to the nations, "Rejoice with God's people." Truly Israel shall yet be the head and not the tail amongst the nations of the earth.

God's ways with Israel cluster around two persons, Abraham and David. To the former God's promises present a portion, and then the entire earth, as the theater of action; also a seed, and then a seed "as the sand of seashore" and "as the stars of heaven." As to dominion, they present a "great nation." The outcome of this is the blessing of all nations through this seed (see Gen.12:1-3; 15:17,18; 17:7,8, etc.). The item signified by "great nation" is further made plain to David. To him it was promised that the kingdom should be established for the eon (see Heb.6:13 and Acts 2:30), hence it is immutable. Let it also be noted that the Davidic promises are exclusive in their aspect—Israel only—hence we find the gospel of the kingdom essentially and exclusively proclaimed to Israel by the Lord Jesus and the twelve.

The Abrahamic promises place Israel in the premier position—a great nation—but also include the other nations. The ministry of the twelve never enlarged upon the inclusive aspect of the Abrahamic relationship. This was left to the apostle Paul.

In taking Abrahamic blessings to the nations, Paul emphasizes the spiritual portions of the blessings, those which deal with sin, and bring righteousness, life, and salvation (see Rom.4 and Gal.3 and 4). These are the vehicle, the instruments to the blessings and inheritance with Abraham, for the promise that Abraham should be heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith (Rom.4:13).

The Galatian epistle is a defense of the doctrine of Romans as to how righteousness arises, whether by law or promise (see chapter 3). Romans bars the mouth of both Jew and gentile. Galatians 3:22 says all are under sin; so righteousness is on the same level for Jew and gentile. They are both Christ's, and consequently are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to promise. The Jew, however, retains the ascendancy in those blessings which constitute the distinction between Israel and the nations (see Rom.3:1,2; 9:1-5; 11:28,29); Israel will yet be the "great nation" bringing blessing to all families of the earth.

In considering the gospel as preached by Paul in Romans four, and in Galatians, it must be recognized that the righteousness corresponding to justification could be proclaimed to individuals in just the same way as God dealt with Abraham of old. But it is also said of Abraham, "God gave him none inheritance" (cf Acts 7:5 and Heb.11:39), and this notwithstanding the record that "Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness" (Rom.4:3). This is just the position of the nations during Paul's ministry prior to Acts twenty-eight, and this is so as a consequence of Israel's defection and apostasy. Whilst Israel remains obstinate the salvation of the nations cannot proceed to its material eventuation, viz., the particular place of the nations in the kingdom of God on the earth.

Prior to Acts twenty-eight, in addition to the justification of the individuals out of the nations being preached, based on and typified by Abraham, we have also a secret made known in connection with the evangel, and based on Israel's defection. This secret is that God is conciliated to humanity, including all

nations (as such). As a result the nations (a wild olive) become the medium of light. The oil of the olive berries supplied the light in the tabernacle and temple. The nations being grafted into the olive tree can give out the light supplied by the root, which is Israel (Rom.11:16-18). The apostle emphasizes the fact that this position of the nations is precarious, for the natural branches will be grafted again into their own olive tree. Thus, just as Israel's defection has been the riches of the nations, so also will the unbelief of the nations be life from the dead for Israel; thus all Israel shall be saved. Here we have the boundary of any ascendancy of the nations (as such) made known prior to Acts twenty-eight. This aspect of the conciliation relative to the nations must retire when Israel assumes her position as outlined in the promises to the fathers, and detailed in the prophets, and confirmed by God's greater Prophet and Son, Jesus Christ (Rom.15:8).

The conciliation of Romans five and eight functions now as to individuals, and is augmented by the teaching of Ephesians. Beyond this economy, when God again takes up Israel, it will retire, coming again into view in the post-millennial period, that is, the new heavens and earth (see Rev.21).

Is the position of the nations here outlined to remain? Are individuals or the nations simply to enjoy the salvation through justification and righteousness of the evangel as proclaimed in Romans four, and then take their place in the kingdom at the advent of the Lord Jesus Christ, meanwhile enjoying the grafting into Israel's olive tree, to be "broken off" when Israel are saved?

During the period reaching from Acts thirteen to twenty-eight, which we have termed the dispensation of the "transition," everything is in a state of flux. If it is a transition then we must expect to find the elements of change. Apart from the fact of a change being inaugurated at Antioch in Acts thirteen, for what reason should Paul and Barnabas be separated? At the beginning of Romans Paul says he was severed to the gospel of God. Clearly then, he was not attached to it before. The dimensions of the movement at this initial point are not apparent. The apostle's statements to the elders at Miletus in Acts twenty are retrospective and prospective; he counts not his life dear to finish his course (see 20:24). Immediately subsequent to this he is a prisoner, and the only finishing we have in the Acts finds him at Rome. Beyond this point and outside the scope of the Acts we have the Ephesian group of epistles. What a climax, indeed!

It is evident when we consider the record of Paul's ministry in the Acts with the contemporary epistles, that there are many things in the latter which are not referred to in the former. If we import them into the Acts, then we get an emphasis of the transition.

The body as detailed in 1 Corinthians twelve is nowhere spoken of in the Acts, but evidently it arose as a result of Paul's ministry during that period. Strictly, it is outside the design of the Acts to deal with it. On the other hand, the body did not, then, exist on the plane of Ephesians. The teaching gathered around "the body" is distinctly connected with Paul's ministry since his separation; it is a result of his activities outside the land, and is a peculiar assemblage composed of Jew and gentile on the ground of grace and faith. The pre-prison epistles make it evident that the nations were partakers of Israel's blessings (Rom.15:27). Israel was redeemed from a curse-bringing law, that Abrahamic blessings might come to the nations (Gal.3:13,14). Here we have a difference in status, so also is it in "the body" of 1 Corinthians twelve, There is difference in the rank of the members—foot to hand, ear, eye, nose, feet to head—less honorable—uncomely parts. But in Ephesians it becomes a JOINT-BODY, all members are of equal rank, and the Lord Jesus Christ is defined as the "Head." This point is strongly stressed in the second chapter of Colossians. In Romans twelve and 1 Corinthians twelve, the body figures the spiritual relation of the saints to each other, the "head" being one of the members, but in Ephesians Christ is the Head of the body. Christ is our complement, an immense difference which is duly stressed by the context of the Ephesian epistle. Here the "body" has for its hope and destiny a heavenly (dative case) allotment. No longer are the nations waiting for Israel's kingdom. They are now fellowcitizens, and not aliens, or even guests, of Israel.

Thus we are led step by step to the heights of the Ephesian revelation. It has been a transition, indeed! The nations' salvation does not now eventuate into the kingdom under Israel, but they have been brought

through a period and ministry which has gone from glory to glory to a celestial destiny.

Thus God can and will still fulfill to His ancient people His promises to the fathers. And, until then, believers of the nations are gathered *on equal terms* with believers of Israel into one body of which Christ is the Head, for a heavenly allotment. This was the secret "hid in God," and this is the peculiar phase of the present economy.

Those to whom Paul ministered, previous to Acts twenty-eight, have not been robbed or dealt with falsely, rather have they been enriched through the contingency. Israel's defection was part of God's plan, and is justified by the Ephesian blessing. If the apostle had only proclaimed salvation and an inheritance in the kingdom under Israel, whose subsequent defection prevented the eventuation of that blessing, then rather had the nations been confounded.

To those of Israel, ministered to by "them that heard the Son in these last days," the Hebrew epistle was written. Their position is like the saints of old who awaited the full number of God's elect. Their own brethren have failed them now, even as they did of old in the wilderness. They are enjoined "to go forth unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach" just as their brethren did in a similar case of apostasy (cf Ex.33:7). The new covenant still stands, and had in view a change (Heb.7:12). Truly these Hebrews have come to the inglorious end of that which the law inaugurated and which end was hid from them. Moses veiled the fading glory of his face, so that they could not see that which was to be abolished (2 Cor.3:13).

A probationary pardon had been proclaimed by the twelve to Israel; through repentance some had tasted of the heavenly gift. If they should fall away, it was impossible to renew them again to repentance, seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh (see Heb.6). This is totally different teaching to what Paul has preached to the nations. The preaching of the twelve in the Acts to Israel had as its basis the "beginning" which Messiah made. Peter in his two shepherd epistles counsels those who gave diligence to go on unto perfection as the saints of old had done.

Since the close of Acts the kingdom cannot be announced to Israel as impending; its promises have become "in abeyance," and so all hopes connected with it. The truth for the present can only be discovered in the epistles of the apostle Paul; he alone has the deposit of truth for this secret economy, and this is his claim. Let us then give heed to it and not seek to cloud our vision by mixing it up with other portions of scripture; let us "rightly apportion" the Word even as he enjoins us.

E. H. Clayton

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